“But why?” I ask again, even though I know what he’ll say.   
“Because it’s tradition.”

He always says that. My papa. He’s not a tall man, but he has much height in the soaring ways of our family and la raza, too.

Papa leans against the shiny side of our vendor truck with the black script that announces Diaz Family Food. The heavy smell of grease and corn hangs over us like a banner, an invisible proclamation: tradition.

Our family as always is at the charreada, the Mexican-style rodeo, to sell tamales, burritos, refried beans, and sweet bread. The real stuff. Not the Taco Bell version.

I try a different angle. After all, I’m good in geometry. “Papa, it’s just this one, small weekend. Rafael can help.”

My cousin. He helped last year when I had my appendix out. I wonder briefly if I have another body part to give out.

“Consuela,” says Papa, then he bends over a sack of pinto beans. He lifts the fifty pounds as easy as my tiny baby sister and continues, “This is the final charreada and it is gonna be huge. I need your help. Not Rafael who goofs around.”

I sigh. My expertise isn’t what he needs. Any fool can take orders. It’s not complicated to yell, “Four chicken burritos, one green sauce, three red, two large Cokes, two medium 7Ups.” No, it’s not my expertise in serving food that my precious parents want to preserve. It’s that tradition again, our familia thing, the one that leads to la raza, the bigger picture of our people, who we are as Latin Americans. At least that’s how Papa and Mama see it. But I don’t see things just that way. Not anymore.

Papa goes into the house with the beans, for Mama to soak, then cook. I see my exit and in the dusk fling myself down the street, fast, furious, flying.

Kids play on the street, kicking soccer balls and riding bikes, rushing about like wasps from a knocked-down nest. As usual, it’s the boys playing outside, with the rare girl running alongside until she can be gathered back into her house.

Papa is disgusted with my long walks. For once Mama tells him to let me be. She knows that I will explode like a star going nova if I am to stay home always.

Each of my strides jars a different, recent memory. Earlier this week at school: my teacher exclaiming over my work in physics, “Excellent work, Consuela. I’ll write a letter of recommendation for you. You should really apply to Cal Tech and MIT. You’re coming to the weekend astronomy camp, right?” My heart sang. The stars. For the last two years, they are all I’ve wanted to do: Study them, chart their fierce light, listen to them, learn what they are saying. Stars do talk—really—with radio waves for words. But when I got home from school, an eclipse was on.

Parents, on the dark side: “You will not go to any camp. Isn’t school during the week enough? You have to help us with the business.”

Me, trying to remain calm in the light: “What about Manuel?” My brother, older by a year.

Parents, astonishment: “He has football practice.”   
“So what! I’m getting top honors in science! He’s just playing junior varsity

football!”

More genuine astonishment: “But he’s the son.” Meaning, of course, I’m only the daughter, only a girl. Maybe they don’t mean to, but they’re banishing me to the dark. I can’t let that happen.

Later Mama tried to soothe me. “M’ija,1 it’s because we love you. We want you to be happy with a nice boy, to have a family.”

“Are you saying being an astronomer and being happy with a nice boy are not compatible?”

She was saying that with her hands that touched my hair, with her liquid Spanish murmuring, with her eyes that lingered on my face, imploring me to stop struggling in this foolish manner.

I cross busy Lincoln Avenue and head up Rio Hondo Road, past the earth dam. The oil hills, scrubby with ugly bushes, prickled with derricks, bunch up on one side, then unfurl into the familiar, sandy, flattened flood plain.

The night is clear, rare in smoggy L.A. My science class is at this moment zooming away from L.A. for a weekend at Joshua Tree. They will observe the breathtaking stars from the desert floor.

A sob shakes my lungs. I didn’t even know I was crying, but tears drip down my chin and onto my shirt collar. Why didn’t I just go, like my friend Mia suggested? Because I have these stupid ideals, like honesty.

I find that, as suddenly as I started, I’ve stopped crying. The wind, fresh and sharp, brings the hot scent of livestock, dirt, and human sweat.

The charreada.

The grounds are quiet. The arena is smooth as flour tortilla. Many of the charros’ 2 horses are stabled here in tidy, low barns, including the one belonging to Tío Jesús, Papa’s brother. Tío Jesús’ horse is an Andalusian, the color of very ripe plums.

The stock pens are on the far side, closest to the flood control, the citified riverbed that captures the water and hurries it to the sea, thirty miles away. Some of the water rushes from the San Gabriel Mountains, ten miles away,   
a dark stain in the north sky. The flood control is a hundred miles long, mountains to ocean. I’ve ridden this nearby stretch a million times, along   
its sandy path on my uncle’s serious but kindly horse. Horses in the city—   
it sounds funny—the charros, they wouldn’t have it any other way. Like my family. Life has to be a certain way. Their way.

Not for me though. Sorry, Papa, Mama. Your world isn’t my world. It’s not that I’m trying to pretend my Mexican blood doesn’t course through my veins, it just means that my blood is calling to different things. That isn’t wrong   
or bad.

Is it?

Mama, Papa, they just don’t get it.

Or maybe they do. Perhaps that scares them.

I climb the sturdy metal pipe corral. I bypass the cattle, lumpy beasts dozing like logs in a stream, dull, empty life, cut off from their roots, and head out to the edge of the corrals.

I’ve been going to charreadas since I was a baby. The smell of dirt and animals was often overlaid by the stronger scent of greasy bean burritos, but   
I’d always sniff and sniff until the odor of hot horses and freshly shaken alfalfa flakes overtook me. When I was really little I’d clap my hands and crow, “Char, char.” I’d play I was a charro and swing astride the nearest fence, imagining I rode the finest horses—a Paso Fino, slate gray with white banners for a mane and tail, or a chestnut Andalusian, lifting his hooves high in the Spanish walk. The horse and I always moved as one—a seamless centaur.

What happened? Why did I change?

No moon tonight. My science class is observing stars tonight because a moonless night shows the stars the best. Starlight. I wish I could hold the light of those distant fires in my hands, bright and smooth as a sea stone, or maybe poured into a bowl and drunk.

The barns glow in the orange fog lights. Inside the stalls darkness swells, with an occasional flash of animal life. I hurry around them.

Farthest from the main arena is the mares’ pen. I lean on the rails. The mares shy nervously, young wiry things, most of them rented for the weekend

from slaughterhouses. By Sunday night, they’ll be off to the slaughterhouse stockyards. I never used to think about them. I mean, what was the point?

The last few months, though, I found I couldn’t watch the horse-tripping. I’d busy myself in our truck, chopping chilis, slicing onions, refilling the Coke machine, anything. But even when I’d turn away from watching the piales en el lienzo and mangana a caballo,3 charros performing their artistic ropework with the mares their targets, my stomach would still be tightened up because I knew how the mares would look when snared. If the charro does it right, the mare rolls on her shoulder, landing hard, but gets up, shaken, bruised, but walking. If he doesn’t throw her correctly, she falls very hard and sometimes can’t get up.

Don’t get me wrong. Working the magic of the rope is hard, clever work. Charros are artists, as much as any writer, painter, singer, or astronomer. Tío Jesús trains and trains and he still screws up, snaring a mare wrong, crashing her spectacularly in a wild somersault, so she lands on her head. Sometimes the mares are so injured that the men who rented the mares started a “you broke ’em, you keep ’em” policy. If the horse is so damaged that she can’t be loaded and trailered to the slaughterhouse, then they make you keep her.

I swing my leg over the top pipe and perch on the cold metal. One mare, pale as eggshells, whirls, ears up, like antennae, watching me. If she were a girl, she’d look like Fai, the Chinese girl in my class, also in the science club. Fai works long hours in her parents’ Chinese takeout. Some nights, she’s told me, she doesn’t go to bed until two a.m. and then she has to get up at six to make it to school. Fai has deep smudges under her eyes and this little mare would, too, I bet, if horses got bags under their eyes.

I slip off the corral. Every head flings up, wild forelocks toss between pointed ears, and tension bolts up every leg. All senses lock on me, the intruder.

“Sorry,” I whisper. Several mares whirl at my words and spin away across the pen to the far side. My little Chinese mare is brave. She continues to stare at me. She blinks her large, dark eyes. She shakes her neck and paws the ground with a dainty oval hoof, her gaze never shifting from my face.

Tomorrow will be different. She will burst, terrified, out of the chute. A charro will spur his pampered, well-groomed horse after his waif. He will snare her. He will throw her to the ground. Yes, artistically. But the ground is hard whether the rope is tossed prettily or not. In all fairness, I have to ask, is it any worse than roping calves, or goats? No. But it clutches at me with a tightness   
I can’t ignore. I just know that I don’t want to see her tomorrow frantically scrambling on her hind legs, trying to scale the arena’s smooth walls, then spinning around the arena for any escape only to be slammed into the ground.

I edge away along the fence line. The wind is cooler, tinged with sage and damp dirt. If I was at Joshua Tree I’d train my telescope near the Hercules constellation and study M-13, a cluster of stars so dense that if you lived on a planet nearby, night would never fall. There the sky would always be filled with brilliant starlight, clusters of stars like bunches of heavy grapes, plump, white, shining.

Never would there be night. How would that change a human’s life? Change a mare’s life?

I unlatch the gate. A packed dirt path leads one way to the arena. Another path, softer, less used, flickers up to the riverbed. I shove the gate wide.

I think the pale mare will realize she’ll need to keep going north on the riverbed to the mountains beyond the city, to a place where there is no night for her.

The mares skitter from me like bugs over a pond as I walk toward them. The starlit mare is farthest away from me, but she locks onto my gaze, telescoping the distance between us, until we are closer than any binary star system. I close in. With a quiet dignity, she suddenly folds, turns, and walks calmly out of the open gate. The other mares see her outside and trot in circles, confused. Silly things. I raise my arms, shooing them out after the pale mare.

The remaining horses rush for the gate like the tail of a comet, fine, fiery.

In the lead, the pale mare trots, her tail streaming ribbons. She passes under a fog light, an alien creature, then under another and another, until she is herself again, galloping away from the grounds, traveling light.

“That’s right,” I say admiringly. “Don’t even look back.” I turn and fade away into the night as shouts from security erupt from a nearby barn. The image of the starlit mare glows before me. Maybe I won’t mind as much working tomorrow because in this darkness I’m beginning to see the path the stars have laid down for me. I hurry back home, my step lighter than it has been in a long time.